

THE SCOTTISH MORNING PRESS AND THE DEVOLUTION REFERENDUM OF 1979

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Introduction

A distinctive daily and Sunday Press is published in, or for, Scotland. This Press, hereafter referred to collectively as the "Scottish morning Press", regards itself as the guardian and recorder of Scottish political interests. Most of the papers took up positions on the question of a Scottish Assembly as proposed by the Scotland Act 1978 and regarded the campaign leading up to the referendum on 1 March 1979 as a major news story. This article sets out to describe the salient characteristics of the Scottish morning Press, to describe the way it handled the referendum, and to assess the possible effects of Press activity.

The Scottish Morning Press: Its Existence and Composition

Past commentators on Scottish affairs have tended to ignore the existence of a Scottish Press or have noted and described it without identifying its role. Writers on the development of nationalism invariably draw a connection with Scottish literature but usually exclude the mass literature which is actually read by most of those who make a nationalist revival possible, concentrating instead on minority literary tastes. There has recently been some attempt at redress. As one writer has warned:

"Nobody can appreciate Scottish culture unless he reads (even if he cannot understand) the *Sunday Post* which is read by a staggering 77 per cent of the adult population of Scotland".¹

The most recent *Royal Commission on the Press* found a higher percentage of morning paper readers among Scots than among other Britons.² Moreover, different papers were read in Scotland from elsewhere in the UK. Penetration by the London Press is less extensive in Scotland, the readership of popular

Sundays is totally different and only the British quality Sundays maintain their market share, thanks to the lack of indigenous competition. Roughly four out of every five morning papers read in Scotland are published specifically for the Scottish morning market.

The Scottish morning Press consists of nine titles: two quality dailies, circulating throughout Scotland; two popular tabloids covering the same area; two regional dailies covering respectively the Dundee and Aberdeen areas and their hinterlands, and three Sunday papers.

The papers and their stance on devolution can be summarised as follows:

The Quality Dailies

The Scotsman. Owned by the Thomson Organisation. Published in Edinburgh. Circulation 90,000. Traditionally in favour of some form of Home Rule or federalism. Critical of aspects of the Scotland Act but campaigned ardently for "Yes" vote.

The Glasgow Herald. Owned by George Outram & Company, itself owned by Scottish & Universal Investments (SUITS) which, throughout the referendum campaign, was the object of a take-over bid (subsequently successful) by Lonrho. Published in Glasgow. Circulation 115,000. Formerly anti-devolutionist and always referred to "assembly" with a lower case "a". After conversion of SUITS' then chairman, Sir Hugh Fraser, to Scottish nationalism in 1974, attacks on nationalists were muted. Latterly supported devolution though with more resignation than zeal.

The Popular Tabloids

The Scottish Daily Express. Owned by Express Newspapers, owned in turn by Trafalgar House Investments. Formerly pro-devolutionist. Founder Lord Beaverbrook had flirted with early Scottish Nationalism. Expressions of Scottishness intensified when publication moved to Manchester in 1974. Following Trafalgar House take-over, switched to militant anti-devolution line.

The Daily Record. Part of Mirror Group Newspapers, owned by Reed International. Published in Glasgow. Circulation 700,000. Pro-Labour but favoured devolution even before Labour Party convinced. Enthusiastic "Yes" campaigner.

The Regional Dailies

The Courier & Advertiser (Dundee). Owned by D. C. Thomson,

a private local company. Circulation 135,000. Traditional, old-fashioned paper. Has consistently opposed devolution. The *Press & Journal* (Aberdeen). Owned by Thomson Organisation. Circulation 115,000. Low interest in devolution. Generally adopted stance of unenthusiastic neutrality.

The Sundays

The *Sunday Post*. Ownership as *Dundee Courier*. Published in Glasgow. Circulation undisclosed but believed to be over one million. Was suspicious of the devolution proposals but believed some sort of change necessary. Had difficulty in reconciling strong Scottish consciousness with innate conservatism.

The *Sunday Mail*. Ownership as *Daily Record*. Published in Glasgow. Circulation 800,000. Most nationalist of the Scottish press. Fervent and colourful "Yes" campaign.

The *Scottish Sunday Express*. Ownership as *Scottish Daily Express*. Published in Manchester. Little interest in Scottish affairs and little attention given to devolution — and that very hostile.

The Scottish Morning Press:

Coverage of the Referendum Campaign

The coverage of the referendum campaign has been studied for the seven months commencing on 1 August 1978, when the Royal Assent was granted to the Scotland Bill and ending on 1 March 1979 when a referendum was held in Scotland in which voters were asked whether they wished the Scotland Act to be implemented, an argument which was presented chiefly in terms of whether an Assembly should be set up in Edinburgh. Those in favour of an Assembly secured a narrow majority but failed to win the support of 40% of the electorate which would have ensured its establishment automatically.

The definition of such a period is inevitably arbitrary but the inclusion of earlier periods was beyond the scope of this study. The limited evidence available suggests that popular feeling on devolution remained relatively constant during the legislative stages but changed significantly during the period under consideration.

The Scottish morning Press covered the referendum campaign in different ways, not only in terms of political advocacy but also in terms of the extent and style of coverage. Indeed

the approaches adopted were so varied that the tendency to regard the Scottish Press as homogeneous deserves to be questioned. This is in itself a finding worth emphasising here and testing in further studies of the British Press.

Space Allocated

There was a great variation in the space allocated to the referendum. The traditional measure of space is the column inch. The papers surveyed had a wide range of page sizes, column width and type faces, making valid comparison difficult, and space allocated has therefore been expressed as a percentage of the total editorial space available in each paper. Editorial space is defined as being all the space in the paper other than advertisements and advertising features. Table A shows the percentage of editorial space in each paper allocated to the referendum month by month.

Two extremes are recorded. *The Scotsman* is pre-eminent in its coverage with 3.5%. In February this rose to a remarkable 13%: in a typical twenty-page *Scotsman* this would mean between a page and a page and a half devoted to the subject. On some days the figure was well above that. At the other extreme the contribution of the *Scottish Sunday Express* is negligible at 0.2% and, being statistically worthless, will be omitted from much of the ensuing discussion and tables. The other papers cluster round the 1% mark. If the papers are ordered by allocation of space and their referendum stance noted, an interesting pattern emerges. Table B shows that support for devolution is associated with higher coverage.

The Build Up of Coverage

Table A also demonstrates the build-up of coverage which predictably increases as referendum day approaches. But the pattern of build-up varies with different papers. Table C, which expresses Table A in index form, shows this more clearly. *The Scotsman*, *Glasgow Herald* and *Dundee Courier* all stepped up coverage in November when the referendum date was announced. All the press except the regionals stepped up coverage in January 79, and all nine papers stepped up coverage in February. For the *Press & Journal* this was the only significant acceleration.

TABLE A

Coverage devoted to the referendum expressed as percentage of total editorial space in each paper.

month	S'man	G.Her.	D.Rec.	SDE.	DC.	P&J.	SP.	SM.	SSE.
Aug 78	1.16	0.36	0.23	0.05	0.36	0.11	0.17	0.29	0.00
Sept	1.31	0.36	0.31	0.00	0.21	0.12	0.12	0.00	0.49
Oct	0.69	0.32	0.35	0.01	0.05	0.03	0.28	0.00	0.00
Nov	2.39	0.67	0.31	0.19	0.62	0.40	0.30	0.18	0.00
Dec	1.49	0.64	0.27	0.06	0.65	0.25	0.23	0.12	0.00
Jan 79	4.46	1.58	0.60	1.51	0.69	0.33	0.59	1.97	0.00
Feb*	12.98	5.04	4.67	4.44	2.50	4.41	3.56	5.00	1.06
Seven month period	3.51	1.28	1.01	0.84	0.68	0.79	0.71	1.12	0.21

*Feb includes edition of March 1.

TABLE B

Papers, by space allocation to referendum over whole period, with assembly stance

Paper	% space	Stance
<i>Scotsman</i>	3.51	strongly pro
<i>Glasgow Herald</i>	1.28	pro
<i>Sunday Mail</i>	1.12	strongly pro
<i>Daily Record</i>	1.01	strongly pro
<i>Sc. Daily Express</i>	0.84	strongly against
<i>Press & Journal</i>	0.79	neutral
<i>Sunday Post</i>	0.71	sceptically neutral
<i>Dundee Courier</i>	0.68	strongly against
<i>Sc. Sunday Express</i>	0.21	against

TABLE C

Growth in coverage of the referendum. 100 in each case equals February percentage of total editorial space for that paper. This table presents table A in index form.

month	S'man.	G.Her.	D.Rec.	SDE.	DC.	P&J.	SP.	SM
Aug 78	9	7	5	1	14	2	5	6
Sept	10	7	7	0	8	3	3	0
Oct	5	6	7	0	2	1	8	0
Nov	18	13	7	4	25	9	8	4
Dec	11	13	6	1	26	6	6	2
Jan 79	34	31	13	34	28	7	17	39
Feb	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

TABLE D

Readers' letters as percentage of total items on referendum

Paper	Total items N	Letters %
<i>Scotsman</i>	834	49.3
<i>Glasgow Herald</i>	300	47.7
<i>Daily Record</i>	161	9.3
<i>Sc. Daily Express</i>	163	30.7
<i>Dundee Courier</i>	211	63.5
<i>Press & Journal</i>	218	30.7
<i>Sunday Post</i>	59	5.1
<i>Sunday Mail</i>	30	6.7

TABLE E

Readers' letters on referendum, by orientation, as percentage of all letters carried on all subjects, N.

paper	letters, all topics N	total ref letters %	pro devo %	anti devo %	other devo %
<i>Scotsman</i>	2018	20.4	9.1	5.1	6.2
<i>G.Herald</i>	1720	8.3	2.9	3.4	2.0
<i>D.Record</i>	1428	1.1	1.0	*	0.0
<i>S.D. Express</i>	1090	4.6	0.9	3.6	*
<i>D.Courier</i>	1534	8.7	4.6	2.7	1.4
<i>P&J</i>	188	35.6	15.4	14.9	5.3
<i>S.Post</i>	369	0.8	0.0	0.3	0.5
<i>S.Mail</i>	260	0.8	0.4	0.0	0.4

*less than 0.05%

TABLE F

Distribution, by types of coverage, of all referendum items, other than readers' letters

paper	total items N	page one lead %	other P.1 %	inside news %	leader comment %	feature/ diary %	column/ forum %
<i>Scotsman</i>	423	2.36	8.27	65.24	9.45	12.29	2.36
<i>G.Herald</i>	157	4.45	12.73	46.49	13.37	14.01	8.91
<i>D.Record</i>	146	2.05	2.05	24.65	4.10	65.06	2.05
<i>S.D.Express</i>	113	6.19	10.61	48.67	6.19	25.66	2.65
<i>D.Courier</i>	77	5.19	6.49	62.33	20.77	2.59	2.59
<i>P&J</i>	151	1.98	15.23	66.88	2.64	10.59	2.64
<i>S.Post</i>	56	0.00	1.78	5.35	5.35	83.92	3.57
<i>S.Mail</i>	28	3.57	0.00	17.85	3.57	67.85	7.14

The Style of Coverage

While it is customary and useful to compare coverage in terms of space allocated, such a method fails to reveal the different forms of coverage which can be employed. During the seven-month period a count was kept on all referendum items appearing in the press. "Item" here includes news stories, feature articles, letters, opinion columns and so on. As Table D shows, readers' letters constitute a sizeable proportion of the items occurring in some papers. All the papers, except the *Press & Journal*, carry large numbers of letters. Letters on the referendum made up nearly half the total items occurring in *The Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald* and over 60% in the *Dundee Courier*. In *The Scotsman* a fifth of all letters carried concerned devolution, a considerable proportion given the other Scottish, British and foreign issues which receive attention. Despite lively readers' pages the tabloids and Sundays carried few letters on the referendum. Most of these carried in the *Express* were in response to a competition for anti-devolution letters in which first prize was £100! The absence of referendum letters from the *Sunday Post* is interesting in the light of the finding of the recent Royal Commission on the Press that the letters page was the paper's most popular feature. As Table E shows, there was no consistent connection between editorial slant and the dominant view expressed by letters. The predominant view reflected editorial stances in the pro-Assembly *Scotsman* and the anti-Assembly *Express* and went against editorial preference in the pro-Assembly *Herald* and anti-Assembly *Courier*. The category "other" in Table E consists of letters dealing with devolution or referendums elsewhere, those failing to express a preference, and those which were simply obscure.

The distribution of items other than readers' letters is shown in Table F. The "page one lead" is the main front-page story and provides a useful indication of editorial priorities. A number of the *Express* leads were not news but campaign exhortations. On several occasions the *Herald* led on polls it had commissioned. There is obviously more scope for "other page one" news in papers such as the *Press & Journal* which carry a large number of front-page stories. The tabloids rarely carry more than two. The *Dundee Courier* carries only advertising on the front page: for the purpose of this study the main news page was regarded

as page one. "Inside news" refers to all other news reports including occasional back-page news. The *Herald* is here under-represented since it ran each day's referendum news into one long item while *The Scotsman* ran each topic separately. If allowance were made for this practice the *Herald* would probably join the regionals and *The Scotsman* with inside news around the 60% mark.

The *Sunday Post* rarely treated the referendum as hard news and confined most reporting to impressionistic accounts in its Parliamentary diary column. The papers differed widely in the use made of this diary-type coverage which interpreted and analysed aspects of the news. In the *Daily Record* much material regarded as ordinary news by other papers was treated in this manner. Most papers devoted feature space to detailing the issues, background, implementation and possible consequences of the referendum. Only the *Dundee Courier* failed to make significant use of this category of journalism whose growth has been identified as the major change in newspaper content over recent decades³. Most papers made use of the contributed article or column by outsiders. The *Glasgow Herald* in particular has long made use of this device and along with the *Courier* and the *Sunday Post* sometimes paired contributors with opposing views on the same page. Most contributors were partisan to the referendum debate but some use was made of outside experts, to discuss either particular aspects of devolution or the political significance of the referendum.

The Scotsman, the *Herald* and the *Courier* carry several leading articles or "editorial comment" articles every day and made frequent pronouncements on devolution and the referendum. The other papers usually carry only one editorial, not necessarily every day. The *Sunday Post*'s "As We See It" column is less a reasoned statement of editorial opinion than an anecdotal rumination on events.

The various members of the Scottish morning Press thus allocated varying percentages of their editorial space to devolution and the referendum, built up their coverage at different speeds, and employed widely differing editorial techniques to cover the subject. It remains to examine the aspects of devolution which were covered.

The Agenda of Referendum Coverage

The agenda of issues covered by the Press fell into three distinct categories: the campaign itself; the details of the devolution proposals; and the anticipated consequences of devolution going ahead — or not. The *campaign* attracted the usual horse-race excitement of an election. Initial speculation on the date of the referendum was followed by speculation on the result. Several papers carried opinion polls and they were all eager to report each other's findings. There were novel features in the referendum campaign related to the requirement that 40% of the Scottish electorate must vote "yes" if a motion repealing the Scotland Act were not to be laid before Parliament, and to the fact that the campaign groups cut across traditional party allegiances.

The 40% requirement aroused much controversy — about the justice of the rule and about the allowance made for inaccuracies on the register — and much speculation about whether the requirement would be met. The splits in the Labour and Conservative Parties over devolution and the fact that neither Labour faction would work with members of other parties produced not only a surfeit of campaign groups but a wealth of activities and feuds to report. Political personalities found themselves in unlikely and newsworthy alliances; there were predictable allegations of deceit and trickery and one instance of infiltration when the press talked hopefully but vainly of a Scottish Watergate. The financing of the campaign brought some sharp Press exchanges and the wealthiest group — "Scotland says No" — was accused on occasion of using Arab money and (probably more damagingly) funds from England. The unusual alignments posed problems for the broadcasting authorities with their statutory requirement to be impartial. The Press, unhindered by such requirements, followed the ensuing disputes and court cases with enthusiasm.

The party leaders were scrutinised and when Mr Callaghan came to Glasgow campaigning for the Assembly, five of the six dailies led their front pages with the story. It is worth recording that this was the first time in the seven-month period that so many dailies agreed on a devolution lead. The Press, thrown by the odd campaign alignments and suspecting a lack of public

enthusiasm for the subject, tended to fall back on the familiar fare of journalism. This search for personalities rather than abstract issues led both sides to list well-known names in politics, industry, sports and entertainment who supported them, prompting one terse and weary three-word letter to *The Scotsman*: "Who is Lulu?"

One intriguing sideshow was the conflict between the papers. Since its move to Manchester in 1974 the *Scottish Daily Express* had been sensitive to any questioning of its Scottishness. With its switch to an anti-Assembly stance the sensitivity was heightened. The pro-Assembly *Record* challenged the right of the *Express* to claim to speak for Scotland. The *Express* replied that the *Record* was English owned; its editor was even an Englishman! Much energy — and front-page space — was spent in late January on the subject, bringing a rare knock-about element to Scottish journalism though little enlightenment to the readers. In more restrained vein *The Scotsman* drily reported the failure of the *Express* to publish a poll it had commissioned on the referendum. The poll had shown a surprisingly strong "yes" vote.

The *details* of devolution were dutifully reported. All the Press at some point or other listed the substance of the Scotland Act, what was devolved and what would be retained by Westminster. Much space was given to pictures of the hall prepared for the Assembly, the cost of preparation was discussed and there was some speculation on its use in the event of the Assembly failing to materialise. The events leading up to the Assembly were recounted: the *Herald* had a useful account going back a few decades, the *Record* and *Sunday Mail* delved farther, and more selectively, into ancient Scottish history.

The Consequences

Much Press coverage tended to view the referendum vote as an end in itself but there was some speculation on the aftermath of devolution. The "No" campaigners hammered on the themes that the Act was a bad piece of legislation, it would mean more bureaucracy and higher taxes, and might lead to the break-up of Britain. The papers in Dundee and Aberdeen also suggested an Assembly would be dominated by the central belt and hence the Socialists. The force with which this negative case was put pushed the "Yes" campaigners on the defensive. That the Act was bad they sometimes conceded — "But the

best you'll get". That Britain could break-up was conceded implicitly, for why else were those seeking Scottish independence backing the Assembly? On the positive side the "Yes" campaigners could argue that democracy would be brought nearer the people who would be given more control over government.

These however were abstract notions: there was a noticeable failure on the part of "Yes" campaigners to present a vivid and attractive image of post-Assembly Scotland. *The Scotsman* did run a series of leaders, "Agenda for the Assembly", which described what the Assembly might do. Several papers based articles on the newly published collection of essays *Framework for Change*⁴, among them Neal Ascherson's humorous and human description of the Assembly at work. The *Glasgow Herald* and the *Press & Journal* touched on relations between the Assembly and a range of interests — the arts, industry, the regions — but these were far from frequent. For the most part the "Yes" campaigners were more concerned to rebut the grim future forecast by opponents than present their own version. It was left to the pro-Assembly Press to try to put some life into the idea.

The Effects of Press Coverage: An Assessment

Conventional election studies are accustomed to recording the allegiance and activities of the Press during the campaign. The implication is that the Press is in some way important but the issue is rarely taken beyond this point⁵. Political activists and journalists frequently question the role of the Press but while often asserting its irrelevance they behave as though it was important.

The problem is a complex one. It is worth emphasising that in a modern mass society few people can witness politics at first-hand and even those politically active cannot survey the entire political environment unaided. The mass media are not a sideshow to events: they are the major means of observing most events and are often influential in shaping them. For the ordinary elector the mass media are a major means of surveying the political world, either directly or through discussion with those who have used the media.⁶ Moreover in a modern society the media themselves are actors on the scene with their own interests to pursue.⁷

The political effects of mass media are still imperfectly understood. We are emerging from a period of pessimism during

which it was often suggested that the media, for the most part, had the effect of reinforcing existing attitudes. The subject still suffers from the 'hypodermic' approach of early theorists who postulated an inert audience responding to injections of information from the media. This has led to dangerous oversimplifications. Until quite recently analysts of election Press coverage would add up the circulations of papers supporting each contestant and conclude that the recipient of the largest favourable Press was the beneficiary!

An extensive reassessment of the effect of the Press, radio and television has taken place in the 1970s.⁸ Not only is the possibility of their power and influence being re-admitted but effects are now being sought and identified in a wide range of directions. In a resumé of this length only three can be noted, being of particular value.

1. Effects on institutions and elite groups.
2. Effects on other media.
3. Effects on individuals' political behaviour.

The first two will be touched on only briefly.

Institutions and Elites

The Press, radio and television and certain prestige sources in particular are used by other groups and elites to monitor opinion in contexts where their first-hand knowledge is inadequate. This was the case over Scottish devolution where many British politicians, party workers, journalists, civil servants and other opinion leaders had to come to a conclusion on the strength of Scottish demands for devolution, making up their minds in a relatively short period. The prestige Scottish Press available in London consists of *The Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald*. *The Scotsman* has always favoured some form of devolution and appears to give more space to the subject than wider-circulating rivals. This impression has been borne out by the present study.

In the mid-1970s when Government policy formulation was at a critical stage, anyone consulting the four Scottish nationally-circulating papers would have found a concerted demand for devolution.⁹ (The *Express* subsequently recanted: The anti-devolutionist *Dundee Courier* is not readily available in London and anyhow has a reputation for eccentric views. In as much as the Press of an area influence decision-makers by providing a surro-

gate version of public opinion, the better known Scottish Press, right up to the referendum itself, would have been providing an over-estimate of Scottish enthusiasm for devolution.

Effects on Other Media

The environment surveyed by any member of the media includes all other media and their activities. The claims of rival papers made news for each other, so too did their polls. The difficulties of the broadcasters balancing the debate made news. Any action by one newspaper or broadcasting organisation is liable to affect others. Journalists lack audience feedback or the opportunity to test their image of their audience.¹⁰ Instead they write to a large extent for the approval of other journalists and judge their own work by the performance of others. Thus it is very difficult for any newspaper to ignore persistently a topic given extensive coverage by rivals. The *Daily Record* failed to report the launching of the small but controversial "Labour Vote No" organisation but once it received coverage from other papers, assisted by the publicising flair of its leaders, the *Record* quickly gave it mention. Conversely if a paper raises an issue it tends to find its way onto the agenda of other papers or of radio and television by direct report, or because they attack it, or, under pressure for fresh news, develop a new angle.¹¹ In Britain the requirement on broadcasters to display balance enables viewpoints which might be excluded by a partisan Press to get onto the agenda nevertheless.

Moreover, once a new topic is linked to people or institutions already on the media agenda its coverage is assured. Thus whenever the referendum campaign was taken up by well-known politicians, Parliament, the courts, the Church of Scotland and the established parties, it was assured of coverage.

This process enabled one paper, or a group with access to one paper, to feed an item onto the agenda of the rest of the Press. The arguments for and against were thus carried (if only to be attacked) by papers of all persuasions. This process should serve as a salutary warning to those bemused by the simplistic image of papers for and against a topic, or by the fact that the average reader has access to only one newspaper. Thus although the homogeneity of the Scottish Press has been questioned in this paper, the tendency towards a homogeneous agenda should be emphasised.

Effects on Individuals' Political Behaviour

"Media effects" are regularly taken, in colloquial usage, to mean effects on the audience. The impact of mass communications on their recipients has, traditionally, been the area of the subject which has generated most interest. In the absence of any comprehensive model relating mass media to political behaviour there is no justification for asserting that the Scottish Press "caused" any particular development in Scottish political behaviour.¹² However, much work is underway exploring the link between Press and politics and two developments in particular shed useful light on the referendum coverage. They concern the concepts of "agenda-setting" and the "spiral of silence".

The study of agenda-setting is concerned with the consequences of a media system which, from an infinite range of available data, extracts and disseminates a very particular selection of information and news.¹³ It has been said that the mass media are not very good at telling people what to think but very successful at telling them what to think about. Research on agenda-setting has sought to demonstrate that people exposed to the media's agenda will, over time, modify their personal agenda of important issues to conform to the media's agenda. This has been found to occur in certain limited circumstances. However, implicit in the concept of agenda-setting is that of 'arena-setting'. The notion of arena-setting but not the term is alluded to by McLeod et al when they say: "To the extent that the agenda, as set by the media, forces political campaign 'games' to be played in a 'court' more favourable to one candidate than another, the effect may be to change not only the 'action' but also the outcome of the contest."¹⁴

Whether or not the audience internalises the media's agenda, the items on the agenda constitute the arena in which political debate is conducted. Contestants certainly behave as though this was the case and political campaigners make great efforts to push favourable issues onto the agenda and keep unfavourable issues off it. If the referendum agenda presented by the Scottish Press is viewed as an arena it is possible to postulate which side succeeded in establishing favourable issues on the agenda, or, to put it another way, which side could show itself to most advantage in the arena set up by the Scottish Press.

The main items on the agenda were described above. The

issues covered by the Press fell into three distinct categories: the campaign itself, the details of the devolution proposal, and the consequences. These will be considered in reverse order. When it came to forecasting the consequences of devolution the "No" campaigners set the pace. The "Yes" campaigners spent much time and energy disputing charges of increased costs, more bureaucracy and the break-up of Britain, thus competing in the arena set up by their opponents. In contrast the "Yes" campaigners were singularly unsuccessful in using the Press to sustain a positive debate on post-devolution Scotland — despite the sporadic efforts of *The Scotsman*.

The "Yes" campaigners turned instead to the familiar motive power of tartanry and much of the pro-devolution Press took up the theme. One of the "Yes" campaigns launched its final push with a pub Press conference at which pressmen were supplied with haggis and whisky as well as Press releases. Had there been an Edinburgh pub called the 'Kailyard' the "Yes" campaigners would doubtless have used it. The *Daily Record* and *Sunday Mail* resuscitated their own versions of Scottish history and in Whig style presented a "Yes" vote as the logical redress to the 1707 Act of Union or consequence of the 1314 Battle of Bannockburn. On the eve of poll the *Record* readers were reminded: "Now's the day, and now's the hour" (a quotation from "Bruce's Address to his Army at Bannockburn" by Robert Burns). Thus were three of nationalism's more potent symbols invoked in one familiar line. *The Scotsman* found time to ponder the voting intentions of Sir Walter Scott and sparked some lively correspondence from readers undeterred by the fact that he had been dead some 150 years.

Lasswell, writing on nationalism, has observed: —

"The rationalism of capitalism has rendered it peculiarly dependent for positive values, ethical imperatives and unifying goal symbols upon legacies from previous cultures."¹⁵

His observation was certainly supported by the Scottish Press content in 1979. Of the trim, modern, self-sufficient Scandinavian-style Scotland which once inspired Home Rulers nothing was heard during the referendum campaign above the skirl of nostalgia and the jeremiads of old-style unionism. In terms of arena-setting, two themes for debate were laid down: one extrapolated from past experience of rising costs and growing bureaucracy and exploited the ingrained antipathy of the

majority to total independence and the break-up of Britain: the other made a yearning appeal to the deep-rooted sense of Scottish consciousness.

No data exists to determine which side benefited from these arena issues: in future and more sophisticated studies of media effects, methods will have to be devised to evaluate the scale and direction of any benefit derived from the composition of the agenda. However, at the level of informed interpretation, it can be said that prophecies of more government generating more bureaucracy and a higher tax-burden would, given the audience's experience, appear to have a certain credibility. The forecast of the break-up of Britain would, on the continuing evidence of opinion polls, alienate more voters than it would attract. And the stressing of Scottish consciousness and traditions would in no way guarantee a distinctively Scottish form of political behaviour. Research has suggested that there is no lack of Scottish awareness or pride in the cultural heritage, but it has also been shown that there has been no consistent link between this Scottish awareness and political behaviour.¹⁶

The detail of the Scotland Act also featured on the agenda. The only evidence of possible effect is derived from an ORC/*Scotsman* poll which reported the awareness of voters on the devolution proposals.¹⁷ Each devolved topic was only recognised as being devolved by roughly half the sample and even among "Yes" voters 34% believed police powers were to be devolved and 18%, taxation, although neither was to have been an Assembly function.

All the Press in the sample took the trouble to provide factual information on devolution but it accounted for a very small fraction of the total coverage and could obviously be overlooked. Much attention was given to the hall prepared for the Assembly in Edinburgh and this attracted speculation on its use if the Assembly failed to materialise. The preparation of the hall also implied the Government's pre-emption of the voters' decision. This point, however, was raised only occasionally in anti-devolution letters.

The campaign itself was prominent on the agenda. It included the controversy over the 40% rule, the role of the political big names, the activities of the various campaign groups, and the shifts in public opinion.

The 40% rule served as a focal issue in two ways. For

the "Yes" campaigners it was a symbol of grievance and Westminster trickery. *The Scotsman* referred to the "rigged election". Secondly, in the speculation on the outcome, the 40% requirement was a novel point of discussion. In this respect it posed a trap for the "Yes" side. On the evidence of their own claims and of opinion polls up to the autumn of 1978, support for devolution was overwhelming and 40% represented no threat. But as a grievance issue it was irresistible — there were points to be scored off the ethics of the requirement, off injustices in the register, and the effects of abstentions. Attention thus settled on the 40% requirement, on the outcome of the poll and on signs of changing fortunes on either side. The "yes" side's claims that the 40% rule could wreck devolution could be interpreted by "No" voters as an indication that they might succeed.

At this point the concept of the "spiral of silence" can usefully be introduced. The concept postulates that public opinion is based on a "quasi-statistical sense" whereby individuals seek to keep themselves integrated in society by monitoring the climate of opinion and giving voice to those of their predispositions they believe to be in the ascendant.¹⁸ The idea is more sophisticated than the notion of band-wagoning. People do not embrace a new idea because it is seen to be popular, rather they assert a hitherto dormant predisposition because they believe it is now acceptable to do so. By the reverse process less currency is given to opinions deemed to be in decline. The spiral theory allows the existence of committed elements at both extremes of an opinion who will not be moved and are immune to changes in the climate of opinion: the spiral effect is displayed by the middle ground whose range of predispositions is such that they are potential supporters of either side.

In the period of the study the climate of opinion as presented by the morning Press showed the anti-devolution tendency to be on the advance. Through most of 1978 the level of support for the Assembly remained, according to the opinion polls, relatively constant, enjoying the endorsement of two-thirds of those offering an opinion.¹⁹ As the campaign developed the gap narrowed until by polling day it was virtually a dead heat.²⁰

The development of the campaign is worth noting. The "No" campaigners were slower to organise and later in the field. So too were those papers opposed to devolution or neutral

on the subject. Although most people read only one paper the point has already been made that papers influence each other. This slow build-up was pointed out by several anti-devolutionists early in the campaign who noted that their case was still to be put. Given that, it was predictable that once criticism of the devolution plan was finally made, there was likely to be some slippage of the "Yes" support. If the spiral concept was operating then it could be expected that this slippage would accelerate. In such circumstances the opinion polls were likely to reflect the changes and, in as much as they are one indication of the climate of opinion, were liable to feed the process. Other aspects of the agenda may have been relevant to the spiral process. Much attention was given to the big names, particularly the Government Ministers who campaigned. The Labour Yes Campaign linked its publicity directly with the Prime Minister. But in the process it may have forged a link with another spiral — the declining fortunes being experienced by the Government over the winter period of serious industrial disputes.²¹ The coverage, frequently alarmist, given to these disputes during the devolution campaign is a further possible media effect to be noted. It cannot be expanded upon in this study but it emphasises the danger of analysing the Press coverage of the one item in isolation.

There was also much emphasis on other names. Both sides capitalised on well-known supporters though latterly the "No" campaign made most use of the device. The *Daily Record* grumbled about impressionable voters hitching themselves to a star. This complaint missed the point. Committed devolutionists were not going to forsake their allegiance to follow a pop-star, football hero or captain of industry. But for the less certain these public declarations demonstrated that other people had doubts and, while Scottish, could oppose the Assembly. The publicity legitimated a point of view and gave substance to a current of opinion. In the early part of the period the anti-Assembly reader of most papers might have believed he was on his own. By the end of the campaign this impression would have been dispelled.

One final paragraph must be devoted to the question of editorial comment or leader columns — popularly regarded as the voice of a paper. The impact of editorial opinion on other institutions and elites has been noted, but there is no evidence

to suggest that such columns themselves influence readers. A major contribution to the study of media effects has been the recognition that audience members use the Press, radio and television for many different reasons — entertainment, information, social status among them. Some people do seek reinforcement of their own views but others, who may buy the paper rather for sports news or car adverts or local gossip, may use the paper's political position much as a navigator may be acquainted with a landmark but will never visit it. Papers are associated with a cluster of views and their position on a new topic will be interpreted in the context of their existing views. In Dundee for example, the Labour movement, in backing devolution, made the connection that the Dundee *Courier*, anti-trade union and anti-socialist, was also anti-devolution.

Conclusion

It is worth repeating that, given the present understanding of the subject, there is no ready means of assessing the effect of the Scottish morning Press on the referendum campaign. There is, however, a growing awareness that the Press performs a central role in the political process and is potentially of great influence.

The role of the Scottish Press in presenting to outsiders an image of Scotland more passionately devolutionist than the popular vote indicated, has already been noted. It has also maintained devolution on the agenda of political issues and provided a forum for the development of the subject. These are both considerable effects.

As for effects on the electorate, the agenda-setting function and the spiral of silence have both been found to operate in certain circumstances with certain people. If they were operating in the referendum campaign it can be argued that the more likely beneficiary in each case was the "No" campaign. This observation contrasts with the pro-devolution stance of the majority of the Scottish Press and serves as a warning against confusing media effects with media intentions. A study of the Scottish Press on any future political occasion could usefully develop the concepts of agenda-setting and the spiral of silence. There is no reason to suppose that these and other explanations of behaviour need be mutually exclusive. There may well be

a complex of effects in operation on such occasions with different aspects of media activity affecting different groups of audience members. The very limited assessment possible on this occasion should, however, serve notice that the traditional approach of cataloguing the Press and its declared positions contributes little to understanding the effects on political behaviour.

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